

The General Strike in the North East;

a Bibliographical Sketch

The General Strike was without doubt one of the turning points in the development of the British labour movement between the wars. If there had been any doubt before 1926 that it was a moderate constitutionalist movement there was certainly none after. The General Strike was the epitaph on the headstone of industrial militancy. The massive and persistent unemployment of the remainder of the inter-war years was quiescently accepted. Had the General Strike ended in a victory for the trade unions and not a calamitous defeat - and even the maintenance of the status quo in respect of the wages and hours of miners would have been a victory - then the history of the 1930's might have been different. The history of the General Strike has not been re-written since the pioneer work of the American historian, W.H. Crook, was published in 1931. Controversy still attends any discussion on the interpretation of the nine days but the actual facts of the dispute over the country as a whole are generally agreed. One of the sturdiest pillars of this orthodoxy is the oft-expressed admiration for the spontaneous organisational flair exhibited by trade unionists at district and branch level all over Britain. Incredibly no serious local study of this phenomenon was attempted anywhere before the 1960's. In this decade, work has begun in Scotland, Manchester, Birmingham, Nottingham, and the West Riding of Yorkshire under the auspices of the History Group of the British Communist Party, and a Ph.D. thesis has been written on the strike in the North East. These efforts should provide fresh information and by stimulating interviews with persons who recall or participated in what were dramatic events, may assist in the preservation of something of the spirit of those times, that elusive reality which few historians ever capture.

The North East, Northumberland, Durham and Teeside, is a well defined area as was recognised by the Conservative Government in 1925 when they created it, under the title of Northern Division, as one of the ten areas into which the country was divided for the purpose of organising essential services in an emergency. The local historian coming unsullied by previous knowledge to the problem of the General Strike in this area would almost certainly go initially to the Proceedings and Minutes of the Durham and Northumberland Miners' Associations, then separate unions in the Miners' Federation of Great Britain. For the General Strike, however, these bound volumes are singularly unhelpful. There are several reasons for this of which the most crucial is probably the fact that the strike lasted only nine days which did not give the parent Associations time to formulate any wide ranging central strike organisation. All the work, such as it was, in what was early days in a miners' stoppage, was done at branch level and at that level few written records, in the form of lodge minute books, will have survived the last forty-odd years.

None of the other major trade unions in the region have retained any complete record of the workings of their strike committees or Councils of Action, which we know were hurriedly set up in those early May days. However a small, black, nine-penny exercise book, with pencilled entries has been preserved by a long serving Darlington trade union official. This was the minute book of the five-man strong Rota Committees established by the Joint Transport Strike Committee in the town, dominated by railwaymen, to maintain a twenty-four hour service and dealing with hour-by-hour questions of picketing, permits and communications with strikers in other parts.

This book provides a fascinating picture of the excitement, immediacy and some of the problems which strike committees everywhere must have faced, and of course it possesses immense local interest. A xerox copy of its contents may be examined in the University Library at Hull.

Of the other trade unions, only the Typographical Association and the Transport and General Workers' Union have any documents which are of significance to the historian of the General Strike. The Executive Committee Minute Book of the Newcastle Branch of the former union contains references to the aftermath of the strike, including some examples of printing firms who victimised workers and set up non-union shops. It also provides a snippet of workers opposition to the idea of a general strike after the event. The Northern Area Committee Minutes and Reports of the Transport and General Workers also throw light on the problems associated with returning to work.

The only other piece of unpublished trade union material resident in the North East consists of a few notes made by Ebby Edwards during the nine days which his daughter has kept. Copies of these are in the possession of Mr. Sid Chaplin and the University Library at Hull. For additional trade union material an excursion outside the two northern counties has to be undertaken, to London, where the T.U.C. has its own General Strike Collection. The various telegrams, letters, reports and bulletins which have to be sifted through contain several references to activities in the North East during the General Strike though again not elucidating in detail the role of the strike committees as much as the historian would like. While in London the Proceedings and Reports of the National Union of Railwaymen and the National Union of Seamen can be looked at, the former documenting statistically the decline in N.U.R. membership in the North East after the strike, the latter exhibiting a somewhat grisly image of the persecution of several members of the union who went on strike in defiance of the official union policy.

The remainder of the unpublished material only concerns the trade unions indirectly and sees the strike through the eyes of opponents. This is obviously important in that it provides some insight into the activities of the Government's emergency services organisation. The opening up of the Cabinet and Departmental papers has released, inter alia, the minutes of the Cabinet Supply and Transport Committee which sat throughout each day of the dispute and which was the recipient of reports from representatives throughout the country. There are several references to the Northern Division. Also available are the Information Bulletins and Situation Reports put together by various Government departments from day to day while the strike lasted (and in fact continuing until the end of the coal stoppage). These bulletins provide, in the main, a snapshot picture of strike incidents and can be usefully compared with the local press. Their brevity tantalises.

Leaving London and returning north a call at the York Record Office of British Rail will produce a General Strike file kept by the northern section of the L.N.E.R. It is rather thin, but again is useful for the picture it paints of the difficulties experienced by some employees - this time at a carriage and wagon works - in regaining work when the strike was called off.

The records of local authorities, all of whom were roped in by the Government to help maintain essential services, give some indication of the activities of local anti-strike forces. The Minutes and Proceedings of the

Newcastle City Council are especially full and interesting and the Watch Committee minutes describe in considerable detail the way in which the police organised to combat the strike.

The County Archives Office at Durham is the repository for a large amount of material on the coal industry, most of which has been deposited by the National Coal Board and has yet to be seriously examined by historians. The Archives are also the home of the Dillon papers, a collection of correspondence between the Marquis of Londonderry and his agent which spans the period of the General Strike. Both Dillon and his employer were involved in establishing a local branch of the private strike breaking or volunteer registering body, the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies, O.M.S., about which detail has been singularly lacking. Moreover Dillon wrote a series of letters to the Marquis during the dispute which are a cynical, almost detached, record of the strike through the eyes of a prominent member of the local middle class whose confidence in order reasserting itself never wavered.

Newspapers are obviously an important source for the historian of the twentieth century. This commonplace is true for local as well as national editions. In the 1920's there were numerous morning, evening and weekend newspapers in the North East. The weeklies are not very helpful so far as the General Strike is concerned because the printers' participation in the dispute brought the production of most of them to a standstill. The Auckland Chronicle and the Blaydon Courier provide two illustrations of this. Moreover, once they had resumed publication, little reference was made to the nine days, save the odd report of a prosecution for infringement of the emergency regulations.

The daily newspapers are more valuable and the three major morning newspapers in the area, the Northern Echo, Newcastle Chronicle and Newcastle Journal, all brought out strike editions. The production of the papers was handicapped considerably by the stoppage in the printing trades. Managerial and reporting staff managed to bring out papers but this inevitably meant that news collecting suffered. In addition local trade unionists considered that the papers were being produced by blackleg labour. As a result, no strike committee representative worth his salt would talk to any newspapermen. The activities of strike committees therefore, is rarely commented upon in the three daily newspapers. Perhaps it is as well to issue a word of warning about using the twentieth century press as an historical source. Both the Chronicle and the Journal were hard line conservative newspapers, big C and little c. They opposed labour throughout the twenties and one has only to read the editorials to discover how bitter this opposition could become. Their politics undoubtedly invaded their news coverage as well as their editorial opinion. The Northern Echo, a supporter of the Liberal Party, appears to aim at higher standards of objectivity. In any event, the local press is a vital source, warts and all.

The strikers had their own press in the form of single or double sheet duplicated bulletins. There may have been several of these in the North East but only two appear to have survived. The Newcastle Workers' Chronicle was the mouthpiece of the Newcastle Trades Council or perhaps more accurately, the Joint Strike Committee. No complete set exists. The same is true of the Northern Light, published by the Council of Action set up in the Chopwell district of North West Durham. Both bulletins were morale boosters rather than disseminators of news per se. The International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam has a collection of strike bulletins which includes some copies of the Workers' Chronicle and the Northern Light and

the Institute has a xeroxing service.

The British national press contains references to specific incidents during the nine days in the North East such as the Cramlington train derailment and it may be instructive to compare their coverage with that given by local newspapers. The Morning Post did print a series of articles on Chopwell, the "Reddest Village" in England, in June 1926 but these throw at least as much light on the Morning Post as on County Durham as will be appreciated when it is noted that Newcastle was described as the landing place of the Russian invasion.

Finally the June 1926 edition of The Northerner, the magazine produced by the students at Armstrong College, Newcastle, comments interestingly on student attitudes to and activities in the strike, although the keynote appears to be one of confusion.

One of the gaps in our knowledge of the General Strike concerns the effect which it had on individual industries and particular companies within industries. This is perhaps not very surprising. The strike period itself was short and the fact that most of the staples were already victims of depression makes it difficult to isolate the impact of the strike on such industries. If individual firms had retained detailed records, for example listing the total number of their employees who went out on strike, then obviously the difficulties referred to would be mitigated considerably. Unfortunately most companies appear not to have kept anything relevant to the strike period. The one exception is Dorman Long and Company Ltd. whose Thirty-seventh Ordinary General Meeting and Annual Report contains enough material to make the historian wish that such reports were more numerous. In particular leading engineering firms might have been able to present historians with details as to how the so-called second line of workers responded to their strike call on 11th May.

If the major companies of the north east provide the historian of the General Strike with but scant material, the area's Trades Councils are similarly unproductive. None of their records have survived, save for the Forty-eighth Annual Report and Financial Statement of the Middlesbrough Trades and Labour Council which is included in the T.U.C.'s General Strike collection. It is a fascinating glimpse, but only a glimpse, of the problems facing a central strike committee and the improvisation necessary to solve them. In a pamphlet dealing with the development of the Newcastle Trades Council published in 1932, the General Strike receives the briefest of mentions.

Of the contemporary articles and pamphlets which are still obtainable, undoubtedly the most important is the Account of the Proceedings of the Northumberland and Durham General Council Joint Strike Committee, prepared by its secretary, C.R. Flynn, in typescript duplicated form soon after the strike ended. Much of it was reproduced in an article by R. Page Arnot in Labour Monthly Vol. VIII No.6, June 1926, and in Arnot's history of the Miners' Federation, The Miners. Vol.II. Years of Struggle (1953); pamphlet number 22 produced by the History Group of the British Communist Party, The General Strike in the North East (1961) is based almost entirely upon it. This is not the place to discuss in detail the merits of this document which gives an account of some of the central problems which faced the ambitious multi-union strike committee with headquarters in Burt Hall

which, it was hoped, would co-ordinate union activities throughout the two counties. It includes a passage drawn from the actual minutes of the Strike Committee. The complete minutes are lost and believed to be destroyed. Together with the Cabinet Supply and Transport Committee material and volume 196 of the Parliamentary Debates series, the Account of the Proceedings provide the raw material for building up a picture of what happened in Newcastle as the Government emergency organisation was confronted by trade unionists keen to run essential services themselves. In his book, The General Strike (1957) Julian Symons attempted to answer this question; he was not very successful because he leaned too uncritically on the local press. To be fair it remains something of a puzzle.

To complete this rapid survey of the essentially local material, mention must be made of a series of articles in the magazine Plebs, volume XVIII, July to October 1926, which refer to the North East on occasion. It would be less than a comprehensive survey, however, if some mention were not made of those general histories of the period which are not only essential background for anyone interested in the General Strike, but also contain fragments on Northumbria. The Trades Councils in the General Strike by Emile Burns (1926) examines Middlesbrough and Stockton. A Workers' History of the Great Strike (1927), compiled jointly by J.F. Horrabin, R.W. Postgate and Ellen Wilkinson, also comments on happenings north of the Tees. L.J. MacFarlane's The British Communist Party: its origins and development to 1929 (1966) shows that Party membership in the North East increased immediately after the strike but was back to normal twelve months later. A. Bullock, The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin, Vol.I (1960) and C.L. Mowat, Britain between the Wars 1918-1940 (1959) are of course, with Crook, the basic beginning.

In conclusion it should be stressed that although a Ph.D. has been written on the subject of the General Strike in the North East, the subject is by no means closed. The author of the thesis interviewed and corresponded with a good many trade unionists and others who took part in or recalled the events of 1926. But it is more than likely that others still have valuable untapped knowledge. Moreover, not every miners' lodge in the area was contacted and it may be that vital documents lie hidden in some cupboard. Similarly local industries may not have yielded up all their relevant data. The other local studies currently being undertaken should place our knowledge of the General Strike in the North East in a clearer perspective, and when co-ordinated all should produce the most satisfactory work yet on the Nine Days.

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